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Opinion or expertise? There is a difference!

You either like or dislike Picasso's work. That's your personal view or attitude. But art experts (body of knowledge and expertise) judge Picasso as a seminal artist, a game-changer.

You hire a lawyer and pay attention to what she says without wasting too much time offering your ill-informed or uninformed opinions about the law. You hire a doctor and don't second-guess her surgical methods.

There's a substantive difference between personal opinions that are not based on expertise – and informed opinions, which are based on expertise and body of knowledge and research.

Unfortunately, the nonprofit sector seems full of opinions, and far too many are the bad kind, ill informed and uninformed.

For example: Your boss doesn't like the direct mail letter you wrote. Your letter is based on the body of knowledge¹ and research from people like Mal Warwick, Sean Triner, Jeff Brooks², Jerry Huntsinger, and Tom Ahern³.

But your boss isn't "comfortable" with the letter. In his opinion, the letter doesn't represent the agency well.

Who is the fundraising expert at your agency? Not your boss. (And not your board chair or any of your board members either, by the way!) The expert better be you!

Here's another example: Your board chair, the bank CEO, runs a tight board meeting. She uses the executive committee⁴ to work through all issues before the board meets. Committees report at each meeting. Board dialogue⁵ is limited.

As the executive director, you've studied the body of knowledge about governance⁶ by attending workshops and reading books and research. You also serve on boards. You're trying to improve governance at your agency – and that certainly includes board meetings. But your board chair graciously chuckles and says, "I've served on more boards than you are old. We'll stick with my tried and true approach."

Your board chair thinks her years of board service make her an expert in governance and board development. But she's wrong. Experience alone doesn't make her an expert. She needs the book knowledge and the research findings.

¹ Visit www.sofii.org, the global Showcase for Fundraising Inspiration and Innovation.

² Subscribe to Jeff's free daily blog, www.futurefundraisingnow.com.

³ Subscribe to Tom's free e-news about donor communications. Read his books. www.aherncomm.com.

⁴ I'm on a worldwide mission to destroy all executive committees. Read my web column at www.nonprofitquarterly.com. And see my article in NPQ's print edition.

⁵ Visit the Free Download Library on my website. Read "Conversation is a Core Business Practice" in the library section called Other Nonprofit Resources.

⁶ Visit the Free Download Library on my website and see all the resources for governance and boards.

Too-often lousy fundraising and governance

There's something else that severely limits the quality of personal opinions and experience in fundraising and governance: the too-often lousy fundraising and governance that people observe and participate in...and then copy.

For example: I find that most boards are somewhat (or lots) dysfunctional. I'm talking about the supposedly sophisticated boards with their supposedly knowledgeable staff and their power broker board members. Yes. Most boards are not that good. And it's not just me who says so. Read the research and the for-profit and nonprofit sector publications like *Harvard Business Review* and *Nonprofit Quarterly* and and and ...

Another example: Fundraising isn't doing all that great either. There's the donor retention crisis that began before the 2008 recession. The lack of knowledge about donor satisfaction. Insufficient personal face-to-face solicitation. Lousy donor communications. Too many fundraisers don't know the body of knowledge or follow research. And those that do too often get stymied by bosses and boards with personal opinions.

Living in a fact-free zone

There's another problem we have in our work – and in our society at large: fact denial and fact deniers. “We live in a world where scientific knowledge is subordinated to political and religious dogma, where intellect and expertise are denigrated as elitist, where demands proliferate that history be taught as an exercise in national self-congratulation, not critical self-examination.”⁷

Instead of acting as critical thinkers⁸ – learning the body of knowledge and using good research – too many people assert their personal opinion. And these people demand that all others accept the validity of their personal opinions. In fact, parts of our society (and our enterprises, no matter the sector) too often deny facts and assert opinion. Global warming anyone? There's actually a science of why we don't believe science⁹.

Have you heard of the movie *Anonymous*? It's about Shakespeare not writing Shakespeare...the suspicion that someone else wrote Shakespeare... (And, most likely an English lord wrote Shakespeare because how could a commoner write something as great as Shakespeare! In this movie, the author of Shakespeare is supposed to be Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford.)

When the movie premiered, a *New York Times*¹⁰ Op-Ed (James Shapiro, October 17, 2011) wrote this about fact or fiction: “*Anonymous* offers an ingenious way to circumvent...objections: there must have been a conspiracy to suppress the truth of de Vere's authorship; the very absence of surviving evidence provides the case.

“In dramatizing this conspiracy, Mr. Emmerich [film director] has made a film for our time, in which claims based on conviction are as valid as those based on hard evidence. Indeed, Mr. Emmerich has treated fact-based arguments and the authorities who make them with suspicion. As he told an MTV interviewer...when asked about the authorship question: ‘I think it's not good to tell kids lies in school.’”

Are you wondering which is the lie? Shakespeare or Lord de Vere?

⁷ Eric Foner, May 13, 2012 commencement address for doctoral candidates at Columbia University, published in *The Nation* magazine, June 25, 2012, www.thenation.com.

⁸ Read the marvelous *Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking*, www.criticalthinking.org/store. Also available at Amazon.com.

⁹ Read Chris Mooney's marvelous article in *Mother Jones*, “The Science of Why We Don't Believe Science,” www.motherjones.com/politics/2011/03/denial-science-chris-mooney.

¹⁰ www.nytimes.com

Stop the uninformed and ill-informed opinions and the fact-deniers!

So let me summarize, after this rather long rant! Uninformed or ill-informed personal opinion is irrelevant to the work we do. These opinions – too often promoted by whichever “powers that be” control your life or our agency or our world – stop forward progress. These opinions distract us from the right work and compromise integrity.

The job of good and competent professionals – and ethical leaders – is to graciously and forcefully disengage from uninformed and ill-informed opinions.

Read Seth Godin’s¹¹ wonderful blog from April 9, 2012, “Is everyone entitled to an opinion?” Seth responds: “Perhaps, but that doesn’t mean we need to pay the slightest bit of attention. There are two things that disqualify someone from being listened to... Lack of standing... No credibility.”

You and I need to pay particular attention to “no credibility.” As Seth notes, “An opinion needs to be based on experience and expertise.” So you and I better acquire and maintain that expertise and experience.

P.S. Check out Scott Adams’ *Dilbert* cartoon from October 7, 2012... “I like to have opinions. But not informed ones.”¹²



I am proud to be described as “one of the most thoughtful, inspirational, and provocative leaders in the philanthropic sector.” In January 2013, I begin my 26th year as a consultant, specializing in fund development, strategic planning, and board development. I work with all types and sizes of nonprofits.

I’m also a teacher, speaking at conferences worldwide, and serving as faculty in the graduate program for philanthropy at Saint Mary’s University, MN. My books *Keep Your Donors* and *Strategic Fund Development* (released in its 3rd edition in 2011) are standards in the field. I’m a web columnist for the *Nonprofit Quarterly*, write feature articles, publish a free e-news, and blog on my homepage weekly. As a volunteer, I founded the Women’s Fund of RI, chaired CFRE International, and regularly serve on boards.

¹¹ Subscribe to Seth’s free daily blog, www.sethgodin.com. And read Seth’s great books like *Tribes*, *The Big Moo*, *Permission Marketing*, and *Linchpin*.

¹² www.dilbert.com/strips/comic/2012-10-07